

# Choosing right shoes can help prevent falls

By Korky Vann  
The Hartford Courant

**W**inter's slick stoops; icy driveways and snow-covered walks are accidents waiting to happen. But staying inside until surfaces are shoveled or sanded may not be enough to save you from taking a tumble. Research done by the American Orthopedic Foot and Ankle Society shows that in many cases what you wear on your feet can be as hazardous as where you walk.

While a fall can happen anytime and anyplace, statistics show most falls by older adults occur at home during everyday activities.

But Dr. Carol Frey, chairwoman of the society's footwear committee and director of the study, discovered one unexpected cause: Many seniors who had fallen blamed their shoes.

Seniors often opt for shoes with rubber, nonskid soles to help protect against slipping and falling, says Frey. But in some cases those "sensible" choices actually increase the risk.

"What was interesting about this study was that 57 percent of the people surveyed who fell were wearing athletic shoes or oxfords, which are considered 'sturdy' footwear," says Frey.

Some participants reported that athletic shoes dragged or caught on floor and carpets. Others cited slippery soles,

sandals, slippers or boots that did not fit properly, fell off, were too heavy or not flexible enough.

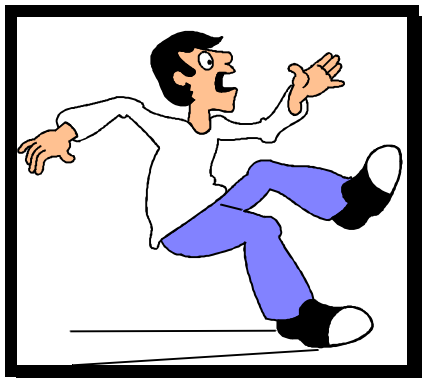
Frey says sneakers with heavy, lug soles and overly cushioned shoes are two of the biggest culprits.

"Those rubber soles that come up over the toes can catch on carpets and send you head over heels," says Frey. "Overly cushioned shoes may make you feel like you're walking on a pillow, but the effect is more (like) trying to maintain your balance on a trampoline."

To prevent injuries, says Frey, seniors should select footwear such as walking shoes that fit properly, provide moderate traction and have laces that can be easily adjusted for swelling, orthotics or braces.

Alexis Abramson, president of Mature Mart, a mail-order business specializing in items for older adults, says replacing cloth laces with elastic ties can help individuals who have problems with flexibility or dexterity. The laces, which are available for both athletic and dress shoes, are among the company's top selling items.

"Lacing and unlacing shoes can be difficult. As a result, people will sometime just leave shoes untied or not tie them tightly enough, which can contribute to falls," says Abramson. "The elastic



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laces stay tied from wearing to wearing. They stretch enough to let you get your foot in and out, but they hold the shoe firmly on your foot."

Frey offers these additional tips for senior shoe safety:

- Don't wear shoes with slippery, worn soles or loose or poorly fitted shoes.
- The heel of the shoe should fit snugly.
- Avoid wearing smooth leather or rubber soles when walking on slippery or wet surfaces.
- Choose properly fitting shoes that conform to the natural shape of your foot. Have your foot measured each time you shop for shoes.
- Foot sizes tend to change over the years. (Some studies show that as many as 90 percent of women wear shoes that are too small).
- Shop for shoes in the afternoon or evening since feet swell and get larger after standing or sitting all day.
- Shoes should be comfortable when you try them on. Don't expect them to stretch.